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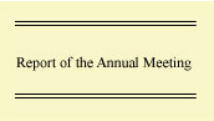

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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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THE EMERGENCE OF THE COUREUR DE BOIS AS A SOCIAL TYPE

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At the end of the regular summer's trading with the Algonquins in 1610 Champlain and Pontgravé agreed to allow a young Frenchman to accompany a group of these Indians on their homeward journey. The young man was eager to spend the winter among the savages in order to learn their language. The advantage of having an accomplished interpreter for future dealings with the Algonquins was apparent to all, but Champlain had also in mind the exploration of the country, and the hope of future French penetration. The young adventurer was instructed "to learn what their country was like, see the great lake, observe the rivers and what tribes lived in that region, while at the same time he might explore the mines and the rarest things amongst the tribes in those parts, so that on his return we might be informed of the truth thereof."[1] The Indians were not very keen about this venture but they finally acquiesced to Champlain's urgent demands, though, in order to be on the safe side they insisted that one of their own men should go to France with Champlain. These terms were accepted and the arrangement thus became an exchange of hostages. The young Frenchman in question was Etienne Brulé who had already spent two winters at Quebec, and who now became the first of the long line of coureurs de bois.[2]

When Champlain returned from France the next year to meet the Indians, and to exchange the Huron, Savignon, for Brulé, he discovered that the French boy had come back dressed like an Indian and delighted with his experiences. Champlain was well pleased with the information that Brulé had brought of the interior and its inhabitants. Relations with the Indians were made easier and both sides saw the value of maintaining friendly relations through such contacts and commitments. Consequently the Hurons requested that a Frenchman be sent to spend the winter with them again this year, a proposal with which Champlain concurred. At least three men were sent, each one with a different group of Indians.[3] One of these men was dispatched by a trader, named Bouvier, who, no doubt, hoped by this means to attract more Indians, more furs, and hence more profits to himself the coming season.[4] Champlain was unable to be in New France in 1612, and when he did get back in 1613 he found the Indians so resentful of the treatment which they had received at the hands of the French traders the year previous that the bulk of them had refused

[1]Samuel de Champlain, *Works* (ed. H. P. Biggar, Champlain Society, Toronto, 1922-36), II, 138-9.

[2]C. W. Butterfield, *History of Brulé's discoveries and explorations, 1610-1626* (Cleveland, 1898), 128, note 3; a certain number of men who might be classed as coureurs de bois appeared in Acadia but they do not seem to have been connected with the main body of the coureurs de bois of the St. Lawrence Valley, nor do they appear to have been a problem in the way that those others were. The limited area precluded so serious a development. Biencourt was described as "leading the life of a Sylvan among the Natives" in 1616 by Father Biard (*The Jesuit relations and allied documents*, ed. Thwaites, Cleveland, 1896-1901, III, 197).

[3]Champlain, *Works*, II, 188-217; III, 138-51. [4]*Ibid.*, II, 201-5.

to come to the trade. In an effort to restore good feeling, and to reopen the valuable trade, Champlain decided to go to the Algonquin-Huron country himself.

On this well-known trip he took with him four Frenchmen, of whom the most important was Nicolas Vignau, who had been with the Algonquins of the Ottawa River Valley during the winter of 1611-12. He had reported to Champlain in France with a marvellous tale about the discovery of a short overland route to the Northern Sea which had excited Champlain's curiosity. On the way up the Ottawa the party met a group of Algonquins coming to trade, and one of the Frenchmen was lent to them. These Indians gave them dire warnings of dangers ahead but Champlain and Vignau pushed on. But at Muskrat Lake, Champlain communicated with the Indians through another interpreter, named Thomas,[5] for by this time he had become suspicious of Vignau. Indian accusations of the man at this place precipitated a showdown in which Vignau was proven to be "the most impudent liar that has been seen for a long time."[6] In disgust Champlain and his party turned back. In spite of this unfortunate episode Champlain proposed sending two young men up country with the returning Indians again this year. They demurred, fearing that another fiasco would endanger their friendly relations with the French, but they finally succumbed to Champlain's insistence though none of them would have the liar Vignau who was left "in God's keeping."[7]

What had started as an experiment had thus become an effective precedent and an established practice approved by both Champlain and the traders. Indeed, the arguments advanced by Champlain to persuade the French Government to grant a trade monopoly to his Company were that they had founded Quebec, advanced past the rapids, aided the Indians in war, and ventured "to send men there to become acquainted with the tribes, their manner of life and to see what their territory is like."[8] New men, and more men, were sent to live with the Indians each year so that Sagard could say of his experiences in 1623-4: "there are interpreters everywhere . . . so as not to ignore any of the languages and the infinity of different words . . . and in order to hold the friendship of this people for the French, and to attract their beavers whilst procuring their salvation."[9] There were, in fact, thirteen Frenchmen in addition to three missionaries in the Algonquin-Huron area that year.[10]

The Company, however, did not see eye to eye with Champlain in this matter. The traders were willing to have men learn to be interpreters, and to pay well for inciting the savages to come down to the St. Lawrence with their furs. Brulé was getting one hundred *pistoles* a year for this work.[11] But they had no concern to forward either exploration or permanent settlement, the former seeming, no doubt, to be needless and dangerous, and the latter inimical to the interests of the fur trade. Champlain, on the other hand, asserted in 1619 that his constant endeavour for the last fourteen or fifteen years had been ". . . to lay the foundation of a permanent edifice both for the glory of God and also for the renown of the French,"

[5]*Ibid.*, II, 255-305; III, 154-205. [6]*Ibid.*, II, 255, 305.
[7]*Ibid.*, II, 307; III, 204. [8]*Ibid.*, II, 221.
[9]G. Sagard-Théodat, *Histoire du Canada* (Paris, 1866), II, 336.
[10]Champlain, *Works*, V, 108-9.
[11]*Ibid.*, V, 132; *Jesuit relations*, IV, 209. Brulé was also allowed to profit by doing a bit of private trading.

and that in that labour exploration and the cultivation of contacts with the Indians had been an essential element.[12] Two years later he complained that the old Company had never "bestowed the slightest reward upon explorers" but had "interposed obstacles" instead.[13]

Some of the coureurs de bois doubtless deemed it wise to adhere strictly to the business of gathering furs for the Company in view of their employers' attitude, but most of them, it would seem, found life in the woods pleasant and exploration an adventure so that they did their bit of looking around with a will. Some of them made outstanding discoveries. Rivalled by the missionaries in endurance and bravery it was, nevertheless, usually the moccasin of the coureur de bois that trod unknown Indian trails, and his paddle that broke the waters of lakes and rivers for the first time. In this respect Etienne Brulé was the leader among the coureurs de bois before 1629. First of known white men he made the long trip up the Ottawa to Lake Huron and southern Ontario.[14] In 1615, having been dispatched by Champlain to aid the Hurons in persuading the Andastes to join them in a joint assault upon the stronghold of the Onondagas, he found the short-cut from Lake Huron to Lake Ontario via Lake Simcoe and either the Humber or the Credit River, so discovering the second of the Great Lakes.[15] Thence he and a few Hurons made their way across the dense forests of unknown western New York to the home of the Andastes in the Susquehanna Valley. The attack upon the Onondagas was a failure and Brulé spent the winter exploring the Susquehanna Valley and part of the Chesapeake Bay area. French goods had found their way into these distant parts through Indian barter years since but no white man, with the possible exception of certain Dutch traders, had ever before set foot above the mouth of the Susquehanna. After three years Brulé was able to report to Champlain, having lived through capture and torture by the Iroquois. Later, Brulé and another coureur de bois, named Grenolle, explored the north shore of Lake Huron. It is possible though not certain that they discovered Lake Superior and the source of the Indians' red copper.[16] Other coureurs de bois whose names are unknown, or merely mentioned, were filling in the details of French knowledge of this continent and its peoples every year as they penetrated further into the Indian world in search of furs and adventure.

Long journeys with the Indians and persistent dwelling at their settlements led the coureurs de bois to adopt Indian ways. In the first place, the French feared to offend the savages from whom came the valuable furs, and one means of pleasing them was the flattery of imitating their manner of life. This was not, of course, a purely one-sided process for the hatchets, kettles, blankets, and trinkets which the French traders brought to the Indians were making the latter increasingly dependent upon the French, and were thus undermining the foundations of Indian economy upon which rested Indian social structure. Indian food and Indian garb clearly suited local conditions better than the equivalent importations of the French since

[12]Champlain, *Works,* III, 14.

[13]*Ibid.,* V, 59.

[14]Butterfield, *Brulé's discoveries, 20,* 138-41; J. B. Brebner, *The explorers of North America, 1492-1806* (New York, 1933), 174.

[15]Butterfield, *Brulé's discoveries,* 48-9; Brebner, *Explorers,* 178.

[16]Sagard, *Histoire,* III, 589; Butterfield, *Brulé's discoveries,* 100-8; Brebner, *Explorers,* 186-7.

they were evolved to suit this environment. The coureurs de bois were quick to note this, and with all the noted receptivity of French colonizers, they rapidly assumed this food and dress as their own. The thrill of novelty may have prompted the first such changes but the utility of the adaptation was sure to appeal to common sense. On the other hand, the Indians were not slow in bringing pressure to bear upon the French in the woods to make them forsake French ways for Indian. Sagard tells an amusing story of the Petuns which illustrates this. One of the ugliest of the Petuns happened one day to see a Frenchman with a large unkempt beard go by. He was immediately all agog. He shouted to his friends, "See that dirty beard, that ugly man. Is it possible that any woman would look on him with favor. He's a bear."[17] Sagard also suggests that the Indians made the French adopt "their clothes and their nudity for the sake of cleanliness."[18] This seems an unlikely though not an impossible explanation for the Récollet missionary did find Frenchmen joining the Indians in their famous sweat chambers.[19]

The adoption of Indian manners and customs was not, however, merely a matter of externals like food and dress and baths. Champlain's "young men" were without doubt like most young men irked by the cramping restraints of conventional society, and French society in the seventeenth century was moulded to the most rigid pattern. Shipping to America was in itself an adventure, but beyond the confines of Quebec lay the endless forest with its silver web of streams, and its hordes of red people who were as untrammelled by the social conventions of Europe as they were unburdened by the pompous dress of Paris. Brulé's first winter with the Hurons revealed the possibilities, and the news spread. As the steady line of coureurs de bois paddled its way upstream into the woods year after year far from the discipline of state and church and family, this novel life of freedom was lived with ever-deepening relish. Licence reigned. Champlain might condemn, the missionaries might denounce, but such pleasures, once tasted, were not easily abandoned. In plain fact no one was in a position to stop the coureurs de bois from enjoying their liberties to the full. And the fur trade must go on. Of these conditions Sagard wrote bitterly, ". . . even the French, better instructed [than the Indians], and raised in the School of the Faith, become Savages just as soon as they live with the Savages, and lose even the semblance of the Christian. . . ."[20]

Even at this early stage, then, most of the French who dwelt amongst the Indians were a thorn in the side of the missionaries. Indeed, the latter affirmed that the French offered as big obstacles as any to the conversion of the Indians through the evil life of some and the indifference of the majority who feared the beaver trade might diminish. They were inclined "to think more highly of beaver than of the salvation of a people. . . ."[21] The Récollets desired to have the Indians settle permanently at Quebec for the betterment of their religious life, but a member of the Company is reported to have threatened to chase off any Indians that the Récollets should try to settle at Quebec, and to deprive them of trade with the French.[22] In the woods it was worse. The missionaries would have some chance of bettering the life of the Huron women, and of improving their

[17]Sagard, *Histoire,* II, 350. [18]*Ibid.*
[19]*Ibid.*, III, 611; *Le grand voyage du pays des Hurons,* I, 190.
[20]Sagard, *Histoire,* I, 166. [21]*Ibid.*, 165. [22]*Ibid.*

morals, said Sagard, "if the French who went up with us did not, out of frenzied malice, tell them the opposite (of what we did), defaming and taxing wickedly the honor and modesty of the women and girls of their [Huron] country, so that they could continue their infamous and evil life with more liberty. Hence those who should have aided and served us in the education and conversion of these people by their good examples were the very ones who hindered us and destroyed the good which we went to establish."[23] Brulé was one of the men whom the Récollet had in mind for he had the reputation of being "very vicious in character, and much addicted to women."[24] Possibly this had something to do with Brulé's tragic death for he was killed and eaten about 1632 by the very Hurons with whom he had lived so long. It is clear that, in casting off their conventions, and in joining the Indians in laxity, some of the French were so indiscreet as to forget that the Indians had their own conventions which it was dangerous to overstep. For instance, Frenchmen sometimes rifled Indian graves in their lust for the beaver robes which were buried therein.[25] By such acts they not merely endangered themselves but the lives of all the French, as in the case which the coureur de bois, Du Vernay, reported to Champlain in 1624. He pointed out that the French had been badly treated among certain tribes because most of them had not behaved well among those people.[26]

Not all of these early coureurs de bois, it is true, fell away so fully from the regular ways of the French community. The Récollets were as pleased with the good ones as they were "scandalized by these other brutes, atheists, and sensualists."[27] Some of the interpreters were good enough to aid the missionaries in learning the Indian tongues but here too the religious found cause for complaint since many of these men jealously guarded their knowledge, and refused to impart any bit of it. Marsolet, the interpreter to the Montagnais, refused point blank to help Sagard, saying that he had taken an oath not to teach the language to anyone.[28] In 1625 the first Jesuits reported the same difficulties. Father Charles Lalemant wrote to the General of the Order, "We, meantime, learning [the Indian languages] from interpreters who were very unwilling to communicate their knowledge."[29] If this was partly the result of anti-Jesuit feeling in the colony, it was primarily an effort on the interpreters' part to retain the advantages attached to their monopoly. In this they were acting like the Indians who often showed a disinclination to take the secular French on their trips for fear of revealing the sources of their profitable trade, and of losing their position as middlemen.[30] The French in the woods whom the missionaries could regard as good and helpful were, in reality, so few that Champlain stood out as a shining exception, and Sagard could say of him, "There will be found but few men who can dwell with the savages as he did for . . . he was never suspected of evil during all the years he lived with these barbarians."[31]

In 1628 and 1629 came the crisis of the first British conquest and the disruption of the colony. Supplies ran low as the boats from France failed to arrive, and it became necessary to seek a solution to the dilemma. It

[23]*Ibid.*, II, 327. [24]Champlain, *Works*, V, 132. [25]Sagard, *Histoire*, III, 647.
[26]Champlain, *Works*, V, 129. [27]Sagard, *Grand voyage*, I, 123-4.
[28]Sagard, *Histoire*, II, 333. [29]*Jesuit Relations*, IV, 179.
[30]Sagard, *Histoire*, I, 227-8; *Grand voyage*, I, 75-6. Such cases may be found in all the early records. [31]Sagard, *Histoire*, IV, 830.

was found in the sending of groups of men to live with the Indians to ease the burden at Quebec. Twenty men stayed with the Hurons during the winter of 1628-9.[32] Such a solution was manifestly made possible by the practice which had accustomed French and Indians to living together in the woods for years past, since most if not all the men so sent in 1628 were doubtless men of past experience as coureurs de bois. In 1629 twenty out of thirty men dispatched with Boullée, who was carrying letters to Cardinal Richelieu and Louis XIII, decided to stay at Gaspé with the Indians rather than take the risks of the voyage.[33] The uncertainties of the trip to France would not likely have seemed so threatening had not most of these men known from experience that life with the Indians was livable, even enjoyable, and hence preferable to a dangerous trip that might or might not end in France.

A few coureurs de bois were prepared to go over to the enemy. Champlain wrote in 1628: "There are not lacking perfidious Frenchmen, unworthy of the name, who go off to the Englishmen and the Dutch and give them information about our condition. . . ."[34] The traitors included Brulé and Marsolet, the two coureurs de bois of longest standing.[35] The long years of breaking with convention and tradition were exhibiting their influence. It was easy for men of this experience to break with traditional loyalties. Quitting now the life of the woods, the easy-going ways of the Indians, the profits of the fur trade, was unthinkable. They had committed themselves to a type of life adjusted to conditions of the New World, and no longer could they contemplate returning to the life of France. They had burned their bridges behind them. It was easier, by far, for them to throw in their lot with the foreigner, if that meant staying in Canada, than to think of going back to the France where they now had no roots. Merely a handful of men were involved in this decision, it is true, though some of them were among the most vigorous in the colony. Others, who cannot be classed as traitors, chose to stay in the woods with the Indians under British rule rather than go back to France. The significance of such decisions was to appear in the future since this type of man, the coureur de bois, and the sort of life which bred this type, were constantly to increase when the French régime was resumed. After all, this decision to stay in the New World even under foreign domination, though made in a more drastic and unorthodox manner, was the same choice as that made by the respected Hébert-Couillard family of settlers. They had all grown roots in the soil of Quebec, and would not now choose to leave.

With the return of the French to New France in 1632 we enter into a new stage in the development of the coureurs de bois. This may be called the period of the good coureur de bois. Relations were re-established with those who had chosen to stay in the woods during the English control, but if Brulé and Marsolet had been the characteristic coureurs de bois of the first period, it was men like Jean Nicolet and François Marguerie who were typical of the new period. Even Marsolet, hitherto unco-operative, became helpful to the missionaries though he remained suspect, naturally enough, in those quarters.[36]

Jean Nicolet came out to Quebec in 1618, and, as one of Champlain's

[32]Champlain, *Works,* VI, 41, 45, 26-7; Sagard, *Histoire,* IV, 888-9.
[33]Champlain, *Works,* VI, 39-40.
[34]*Ibid.,* V, 268.
[35]*Ibid.,* VI, 63, 98-102.
[36]*Jesuit relations,* V, 113.

young men, was sent immediately to live with the Indians. The attitude which he developed is as important as his well-known discoveries. He found the life with the Indians so congenial that he was one of the coureurs de bois who preferred to stay in the woods during the English occupation. He became so identified with the Nipissings, with whom he lived for about nine years, that he passed as one of them, took part in their councils, and had his own cabin and household among them. Nicolet was recalled to be made agent and interpreter for the Company of New France in 1633 though Father Le Jeune states that ". . . he only withdrew to place his salvation in safety by the use of the Sacraments, without which there is great risk for the soul among the Savages."[37] There are no other indications that Nicolet was much concerned about his religious life while with the Indians, nor that he helped the missionaries in the earlier period, though he may have been one of the good coureurs de bois referred to by Sagard. One of Champlain's last commissions was to dispatch Nicolet upon an exploring trip to the West. In the realm of discovery he deserves to rank with Brulé. He discovered Lake Michigan, Green Bay, and the Fox River up which he travelled until he was only three days' journey from the upper reaches of the Wisconsin River, a tributary of the Mississippi. He heard of the Great River but did not reach its banks.[38] Upon his return he settled as agent at Trois Rivières, then moved to Quebec, to take Olivier's place as chief agent. In these posts, and, it is to be noted, after he became established permanently in the settlements, Nicolet was of the greatest assistance to the missionaries in converting the Indians "whom he could shape and bend howsoever he would, with a skill that can hardly be matched."[39] His death by drowning in 1642 was regarded by Father Vimont as an event deeply "grievous for all the country" since his zeal for the Indians' salvation would "inspire even the most fervent Religious with a desire to imitate him."[40]

From the recovery of the colony to the governorship of Jean de Lauzon, the writers of the *Jesuit relations* were constantly painting pictures of the model lives of the French in the settlements and in the woods. Father Brébeuf reported to Father Le Jeune from Huronia in 1635 that ". . . all our French have borne themselves, thank God, so virtuously and so peaceably on all sides, during the whole year, that they have drawn down the blessing of Heaven."[41] Two years later Father Le Jeune announced ". . . the Soil of new France is watered by so many heavenly blessings, that souls nourished in virtue find here their true element . . ." and diseased souls never grow worse and often, in this "salubrious air," "far removed from opportunities for sin," grow better. It is a land that produces "heads of wheat" from "thistle-seeds."[42] In 1639 Father Buteux informed the General at Rome that "it is proverbial among the French, that 'he who wishes to become better let him cross over to new France'."[43] And the next year Father Vimont told his public that "We are living here in a golden age." "Verily, one lives in these countries in great innocency,—virtue reigns here as if in its empire; vice, which pursues it incessantly,

[37] *Ibid.*, IX, 217; XXIII, 275-81.
[38] Brebner, *Explorers*, 191 (note).
[39] *Jesuit relations*, XXIII, 279.
[40] *Ibid.*, 281-3; cf. Jesuit opinion of François Marguerie in *ibid.*, X, 74-5; XXXII, 137-41.
[41] *Ibid.*, VIII, 149. [42] *Ibid.*, XI, 63. [43] *Ibid.*, XVII, 235.

only appears secretly and by stealth, never introducing itself without humiliation. . . . In a word, the road to Heaven seems shorter from our own great forests than from your large cities."[44]

These effusive outpourings of fervent missionaries, intended for a devout audience in France, and, in part, too, as publicity for immigrants and philanthropic supporters, must be taken with a measure of reserve. Even in the *Jesuit relations* there is evidence that all was not as righteous and serene in New France as these descriptions would lead one to suppose. The baleful influence of the earlier coureurs de bois still hampered the missionaries. Father Charles Lalemant wrote to Father Vimont in 1640: "Would to God that all the French who first came to these regions had been like him [Champlain]! We would not so often blush for them in the presence of our Savages, who oppose to us their immodesties and the debauches of several, as if this were an infallible proof, that what we threaten them with, concerning hell, is nothing but fables,—inasmuch as those first Frenchmen whom they knew had no fear thereof."[45] Again and again as disease or other catastrophe threatened the Hurons they accused the French of seeking revenge of the murder of Brulé. "Brulé's . . . wounds are still bleeding," ruefully wrote Father Le Jeune in 1637.[46] In the same year he admitted that there were still "loose fellows who scandalize the Savages through their brutal language," and that the Indians often accused the French of being drunk, and of stealing from them. But, he affirmed, these faults belonged to but a very few unimportant people.[47] In 1641 the Jesuit fathers pointed out that taking French domestics, who were not bound by special vows, into the woods was a very doubtful procedure as there was no way of restraining people except by way of conscience. Evidently they felt that the dissolving influences of the woods life would reassert themselves if ever proper restraints were withdrawn.[48] Also in this period began the traffic in brandy. It started with the independent traders along the Gaspé coast, and at Tadoussac, and gradually found its way to Quebec, whence it was to travel into the woods. As early as 1636 drunkards were being punished at Quebec, and in 1637 Father Le Jeune, who blamed the whole business upon the English, confessed sadly ". . . but it is very difficult to prevent our Frenchmen from co-operating in this dissolute conduct. . . ."[49]

Despite this evidence of human frailty, it seems to be certain that the bulk of the French, both the coureurs de bois and the settlers, lived throughout this period distinctly respectable lives. So true was this that the Jesuits recommended the settlement of Frenchmen among the Indians as good examples of moral and religious living. Indeed, they gave as the second most effective reason for the advancement of missionary work among the Hurons "the example of our secular French." They even agreed to allow French-Indian marriages, and pointed out that these had taken place in the past freely enough when the French had been eager "to become barbarians, and to render themselves exactly like them," but these new alliances were designed to give knowledge of the true God and his commandments, and "were to be stable and perpetual" in contrast to the previous degrading and unstable unions.[50]

[44] *Ibid.*, XVIII, 83-5. [45] *Ibid.*, XX, 19.
[46] *Ibid.*, XII, 89; X, 37, 305-11; XIV, 17. [47] *Ibid.*, XI, 75.
[48] *Ibid.*, XXI, 293-301. [49] *Ibid.*, XI, 197; IX, 145.
[50] *Ibid.*, XVII, 45; XIV, 19-21; VI, chap. III.

One is naturally led to ask the question, what made so sharp a difference in the attitude of the coureurs de bois of this period, as compared to those of the earlier period, towards the social and religious conventions. The answer would appear to be threefold. First, the missionaries in New France were now the Jesuits, representatives of a much stronger and wealthier order than the Récollets who had begun the mission work at Quebec. The Jesuits had arrived in 1625 but they did not become solidly established until, with the return of the colony to France, they received exclusive control of the mission. Their superior resources and organization, their greater numbers, the *donné* system of bond-servants which they utilized,[51] and, particularly, their settlements in the woods of Huronia[52] enabled them to exert a degree of control over the French in the woods and at Quebec that had been impossible for the earlier missionaries. Jesuit influence was, in turn, bolstered by the foundation of Montreal, and by the work of the Ursulines, and the nuns of the Hospital at Quebec.[53]

Secondly, this was a period of greater co-operation and more sympathetic understanding between the Company, the missionaries, and the colonists. This change reflects the influence of Cardinal Richelieu who was keen to build a strong Catholic colony in New France. Most important was the personal supervision of the colony by Richelieu's Governor, the Chevalier de Montmagny, a strong, devout character. Under his inspiration the Company abetted settlement, even of the Indians, and aided the missionaries.[54] "For do not think," wrote Father Charles Lalemant in 1644, "that, in the nine years during which he has had the Government of it, anyone could have acted with more zeal than he has displayed, with more disinterested prudence, with more strength of mind, and with more truly Christian courage, amid the almost insurmountable difficulties which we have encountered, and that would have discouraged a heart less firm than his."[55] An act typical of Montmagny was the issuance of the regular annual presents to the Indians in the name of religion. Pleased with this gesture, Father Le Jeune stated: "It is rare prudence in these Gentlemen [of the Company] to ascribe to Religion what has been given, up to the present, almost entirely through policy. It costs nothing to offer with holy intentions that which must be given for another reason, in order to retain the friendship of these peoples. It is one of the fine expedients of Monsieur the Chevalier de Montmagny and of Monsieur de l'Isle, his Lieutenant."[56] Under this administration there was less interest in making contact with new tribes, and in exploration. The Company was satisfied if the coureurs de bois brought the Indian trading fleets to the established markets year by year. Consequently the coureurs de bois for the most part spent their time during this period in areas, and along routes, relatively well-known and controlled.

Thirdly, the constant menace of the Iroquois, reaching its climax in the destruction of Huronia, and in direct attacks upon the French settlements, forced all the French to hold together in a way that made flouting the accepted customs and standards less thinkable if not impossible.

[51]For a description of the *donné* system see *ibid.*, XXI, 293-305.

[52]*Ibid.*, XXXIII, 269. In 1649 there were twenty-two religious, twenty-three *donnés*, seven servants, four boys, and eight soldiers at the Huron mission.

[53]See Father J. Lalemant's statement in *ibid.*, XXVIII, 269-71.

[54]*Ibid.*, XVI, 33; XVII, 47; XVIII, 243.

[55]*Ibid.*, XXVIII, 47.

[56]*Ibid.*, XII, 257; XXII, 311.

But if the Iroquois menace exerted for a while this beneficent influence, in the end it brought this period of the good coureurs de bois to a close. Father Le Mercier graphically pointed out in 1653, "Never were there more Beavers in our lakes and rivers, but never have there been fewer seen in the ware houses of the country." The Hurons had been destroyed. The Algonquins were depopulated, and the more distant nations were withdrawing for fear of the Iroquois. "For a year," he goes on, "the warehouse of Montreal has not bought a single Beaver-skin from the Savages," and "In the Quebec warehouse there is nothing but poverty." General dissatisfaction prevailed. It was impossible to pay the charges due, or even to meet the necessary expenses of the country. The Iroquois had dried up all the springs of trade. There was one solution and that was now taken. If the Indians could not, or would not come to the French, the French must go to the Indians. So Father Le Mercier records, "Moreover, all our young Frenchmen are planning to go on a trading expedition, to find the Nations that are scattered here and there; and they hope to come back laden with the Beaver-skins of several years accumulation."[57] With this began a new period in which men were to go to the woods in larger numbers than ever. But now Montmagny was gone, and the mission controls in the woods were gone. A new era of licence was being ushered in.

Signs had been accumulating for some time that the period of the good coureurs de bois was coming to an end. The cession of the right of trade by the Company of New France to the Company of the Habitants in 1645 gave the leading colonists a more direct interest in the fur trade than they had previously had, and their increased concern for the trade was sure to make them increasingly restive under any control that might check profits. As the Iroquois wars made it more and more necessary to send Frenchmen into the woods to persuade the Indians once again to venture to the trading centres with their furs, or else, to dispose of their furs to the coureurs de bois in the woods, it was certain that many of the habitants would join the coureurs de bois, or sponsor coureurs de bois for the sake of the trade. Soldiers who had gone to defend Huronia in 1644 had been allowed to trade for furs, and had brought back a good haul.[58] This experience was unquestionably for some of them an initiation into the attractions of the career of coureur de bois. Even from the *donnés* and Jesuit servants came men like Groseilliers to swell the ranks of the coureurs de bois.[59] Jesuit participation in the fur trade, a privilege stoutly maintained at the time of the formation of the Company of the Habitants, may have eased this transition. The brandy trade was expanding. "It is useless," wrote Father Jean Lalement in 1646, "to forbid the trade in wine and brandy with the Savages, there is always found some base soul who, to gain a little Beaver fur, introduces by Moonlight some bottles in their cabins."[60] And one of the first acts which the new Governor, d'Ailleboust, found requisite in 1648 was to issue ordinances against the liquor trade at Quebec.[61] Brandy would be soon finding its way into the canoes and packs of the coureur de bois.

[57]*Ibid.*, XL, 211-15. [58]*Ibid.*, XXVII, 89. [59]*Ibid.*, XXVIII, 229.
[60]*Ibid.*, XXIX, 77. [61]*Ibid.*, XXXIII, 49-51.

Symptomatic of the new period was the appearance of two coureurs de bois who were to become, in some ways, the best known and most notorious of the whole group—Médard Chouart, Sieur des Groseilliers, and Pierre Esprit Radisson. Brothers-in-law, these two men possessed a measure of bravery and ingenuity, and a knowledge of Indian customs and speech that was unsurpassed. Groseilliers had been a Jesuit *donné,* but Radisson had gained his skill through the harder course of capture, torture, and adoption by the Iroquois. He was an apt pupil, and learned to go on a tomahawking expedition and return with scalps and prisoners like any other Iroquois brave.[62]

Intrepidly Groseilliers and an unidentified companion had pushed into the region of Lake Michigan and Lake Superior from 1654 to 1657. The exact course of their travels cannot be ascertained. In their far-flung wanderings it was brought home to them, as Professor Brebner indicates, that in the future the coureurs de bois would have to follow the Indians farther than ever before, to the Sault Ste. Marie, and the Straits of Mackinac and beyond; and that, with the destruction of the Huron villages food supplies for these long trips had become very uncertain. Hence, in the future, journeys to the up country would require two years, or else the French would have to establish supply depôts along the routes of travel.[63] But beyond increasing the cost of the furs, this meant that the coureurs de bois would have to go farther into the woods, and stay longer beyond the supervision of missionary and Governor than at any previous time.

Radisson was associated with the Jesuit mission to the Onondagas in 1657-8 when a group of Frenchmen proved in their well-known exploit to escape destruction that they had learned well how to match the Indians in trickery and cunning. Shortly after the return of this group to Quebec, Groseilliers and Radisson embarked upon the great voyage to the west (1658-60) which was to do so much to restore the fur trade and the economic health of the colony.[64] Information and inspiration gained from this trip caused the two coureurs to plan a more ambitious voyage beyond the land of the middlemen to the source of the fur supply itself. Such a challenge to the Company's monopoly and to the Governor's arrangements with the Indians they naturally tried to keep secret. But the secret leaked out and they found difficulty obtaining a licence from the Governor. D'Argenson wished to send two of his own along and divide the profits equally.[65] The system of licensing coureurs de bois had been established in 1654 by Governor de Lauzon when it had become clear that the old Company system was a failure. The *congé* system was established to save the fur trade which sustained the colony and, at the same time, to keep a proper check upon all those who went into the woods.[66] Groseilliers and his unknown companion, it appears reasonably certain, were the men who made the first trip to the up country with a written *congé* from de Lauzon. In 1661, however, Groseilliers and Radisson found it impossible to come to terms with Governor d'Argenson even with the benevolent intermediation of the Jesuits who wanted the two men to fall in with a scheme of

[62]P. E. Radisson, *Voyages* (ed. G. D. Scull, The Prince Society, Boston, 1885), 63-77.

[63]Brebner, *Explorers,* 227; A. S. Morton, *A history of the Canadian west to 1870-71* (London, 1939), 39-40. [64]Morton, *Canadian west,* 41-2.

[65]Radisson, *Voyages,* 174; Morton, *Canadian west,* 42-3.

[66]*Rapport de l'Archiviste de la Province de Québec pour 1924-5,* 383-4.

theirs for conquest in the empire of furs. So, one night, they slipped away without the official permit. They returned two years later in 1663 bringing with them a great fur fleet, a wealth of furs, and a claim to have made the discovery of an overland route to the northern sea, or Hudson's Bay, from the west end of Lake Superior. The two coureurs de bois had expected praise and reward for their brilliant deeds but they were received by the irate Governor with fines and punishment to their disgust. When redress was not forthcoming from France, the two men took that step which was to prove so decisive. They went over to the English, who, with the help of their knowledge and guidance, soon formed the Hudson's Bay Company, most dangerous of rivals to the French fur traders.[67] Hence have we gone a full turn. We are back to the days of Etienne Brulé. In 1663, Pierre Boucher could write harshly of "the many libertine French" among the Indians.[68] The exploits of Radisson and Groseilliers had inspired many another. The lure of the wild and the dream of profits were swelling the ranks of the coureurs de bois.

In such manner over the years since the founding of New France was created a group of men whose existence was now to constitute one of the chief worries of the royal colonial administration which, at this date, was assuming control of the colony following the abolition of the old company rule. Out of Champlain's desire for exploration and empire, out of the traders' striving for wealth, out of the labour and defence requirements of the missions, was born the coureur de bois. Life in the woods weaned these men from the life and ways of old France. Their commitments in custom, and manner of life, and ways of thought were to New France, to America, to Canada. In a more showy, more slashing, but no less certain fashion than their brothers, the habitants, they were cutting loose from their old ties. Like the habitants they were evolving a North American mentality and outlook. Unlike the habitants they cared but little for authority and tradition. Nor did they have the habitants' love of the soil and hopes for the settlements. To them what mattered was the dip of the paddle in the unknown stream, the feel of good, rich fur, the rollicking life of the Indian camp. It is little wonder that Jean Talon, bearing the responsibility of royal authority upon his shoulders, should find one of his major tasks to be the solution of the problem of the coureur de bois.

Discussion

Mr. Morton said that it had been generally assumed that Radisson had accompanied Groseilliers during the latter's explorations in 1654-7; but he did not believe this assumption to be correct.

Mr. Stanley thought that too little attention had been paid to the activities of the coureurs de bois in the Maritime region.

Mr. Brebner discussed Mr. Stanley's suggestion with reference to the character of the Acadian region, which he thought was geographically ill-suited to the development of the coureur de bois type. The restricted area of Acadia, its availability to sea traffic and to contact from Europe, made impossible the special conditions which obtained in the region of the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes.

[67] Radisson, *Voyages*, 236, 240-5; Morton, *Canadian west*, 43-6.

[68] P. Boucher, *Histoire véritable et naturelle des moeurs et productions du pays de la Nouvelle France*, 135.